DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 385 632 UD 030 522

AUTHOR Bergin, David A.; Cooks, Helen C.
TITLE "Acting White": Views of High School Students in a Scholarship Incentive Program.
SPONS AGENCY Department of Education, Washington, DC.
PUB DATE Apr 95
CONTRACT R117E30184-93
NOTE 20p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (San Francisco, CA, April 18-22, 1995).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research/Technical (143) -- Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Black Students; Ethnic Stereotypes; Grades (Scholastic); High Achievement; High Schools; *High School Students; Incentives; *Mexican Americans; Minority Groups; Racial Composition; *Racial Identification; Scholarships; *Student Attitudes; *Whites
IDENTIFIERS Toledo Public Schools OH

ABSTRACT

Social pressure to avoid "acting White" was explored for high school students in Toledo (Ohio) in schools of differing racial compositions. Thirty-eight high school students, most of whom were Black or Mexican American and 28 of whom were participants in a scholarship incentive program for high-achieving minority students called Toledo EXCEL, were interviewed. The others were academically successful comparisons from the general school population. Respondents did not report avoiding academic achievement to avoid accusations of acting White. In fact, their mean grade point average was 3.3, and many reported competing for grades. Reports from comparisons were generally in agreement with those of EXCEL students. Most students reported feeling no loss of ethnic identity and made few comments that reflected adoption of or fear of a raceless persona. They did resent accusations of acting White when they occurred, but did not seem intimidated by such accusations. Those who had the hardest time with accusations were in racially balanced schools, where they seemed to feel more racial polarization. One table describes participant characteristics. (Contains six references.) (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 385 632

"Acting White": Views of High School Students in a Scholarship Incentive Program

David A. Bergin

Helen C. Cooks

University of Toledo

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
D. A. Bergin
Univ. of Toledo
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This paper was presented at the annual meeting of the American Educational Research Association, April 1995, San Francisco. Requests for reprints should be sent to David A. Bergin, Educational Psychology, University of Toledo, Toledo, OH 43606. This research was funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Education (R117E30184-93)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

"Acting White": Views of High School Students in a Scholarship Incentive Program

Fordham and Ogbu (1986) have described fear of "acting White" as a significant factor that influenced the attitudes and undermined achievement of African American students at "Capital High" in Washington, D.C. They stated that "*one major reason* black students do poorly in school is that they experience inordinate ambivalence and affective dissonance in regard to academic effort and success" (emphasis in original). According to Fordham and Ogbu's theoretical framework, African Americans experience a group identity or fictive kinship with other African Americans. One aspect of this group identity is that members of the group are united in an oppositional social identity that is partly defined as not doing things that are associated with White Americans, who are viewed as their historical oppressors. Fordham & Ogbu (1986) argued against the cultural discontinuity theory of minority achievement, which claims that a major reason for underachievement of minority students is that they do not share cultural background, meanings, and understanding of time, space, and purpose with those who teach them and grade them. Ogbu (1987) pointed out that if cultural discontinuity were a primary reason for underachievement, groups like immigrant Asians should experience low achievement, yet they do not. He distinguished castelike minorities, who have suffered a long history of oppression and discrimination, from immigrant minorities, who may suffer current discrimination but who as newcomers lack the history of persecution of castelike minorities. Castelike minorities are most likely to experience fictive kinship, an oppositional social identity, and low achievement. It is they who fear being accused of acting White because it would suggest that they are not "good" members of their group. An important marker for acting White is speaking standard English; Phinney (1990) pointed out that "language has been considered by some as the single most important component of ethnic identity" (p. 505). Other attitudes and behaviors that the students at Capital High identified as acting White included listening to White music, studying, working hard to get

good grades, actually getting good grades, going to a Rolling Stones concert, and putting on "airs."

The issue of acting White is tied to issues of ethnic identity. Theories of ethnic development suggest that accusing others of acting White may be part of a stage of ethnic identity in which the individual feels strongly identified with his or her own group and weakly identified with or even antagonistic towards the majority group (Cross, 1991; Phinney, 1990). For example, Cross (1991) referred to the "Blacker-than-thou" syndrome as part of the Immersion stage of Black identity development. Phinney (1990) pointed out that the stage of exploring one's ethnicity may "involve rejecting the values of the dominant culture" (p. 503). The issue of ethnic identity increases in complexity as people intermarry among different races and ethnicities, leaving the ethnic status of their children particularly subject to personal construction and reconstruction.

A purpose of the present study was to investigate whether the social pressure to avoid acting White described by Fordham and Ogbu (1986) is common in another city, other than Washington D.C., and in different kinds of schools, not just a predominantly Black public school. In their study of acting White, Fordham and Ogbu (1986) chose to describe prototypical examples of underachieving and high achieving students in one predominantly Black school and how the students avoided being perceived as acting White. That is, they gathered data first and then chose students to write about who exemplified concepts they wanted to illuminate. In the current study, most of the students were known to the researchers because they were part of an ongoing program. They were in a sense chosen first, and then data were gathered about their acting White. The respondents came from a variety of types of schools—public and private, predominantly Black, predominantly White, and racially balanced. In addition, the respondents included some Mexican American students as a test of whether Mexican Americans experience similar pressure to avoid acting White. The major questions of the present study included (1) did students avoid academic achievement in order to avoid appearing to act White, and (2) did they perceive that they had given up ethnic identity in order to do well in school.

Method

Study Participants

Thirty-eight students were interviewed for this study. Twenty-eight were participants in a program named Toledo EXCEL, and 10 were in a comparison group. We will briefly describe EXCEL, then the comparison group. Fifty eighth-grade students are selected each year to participate in Toledo EXCEL, a scholarship incentive program for students from groups underrepresented in higher education. In order to be eligible, at the end of 8th grade they must be at grade level on standardized tests, have a B average, and be nominated by a teacher or counselor. Benefits of the program include summer institutes and field studies (for example, field studies have been conducted in the Civil Rights South, Ghana, and Taxco, Mexico), academic tutoring during the school year, and a scholarship to the University of Toledo. Admission to the program is not based on income, so family incomes vary widely. Students come from public and private schools throughout Toledo, a medium size predominantly White (about 70%) Mid-Western city.

At the beginning of the second year of the program (the cohort that applied for EXCEL in 1990 and among the seniors in Table 1), students who qualified for the program were admitted by random assignment. Random assignment was used that year because there are no tested criteria for telling what kind of students are more "deserving" or what kind of students would benefit most from a program like EXCEL. It was considered that if only highly able students were selected, they might have successfully gone on to college without an elaborate program, although research suggests that even highly able high income "minority" students often drop out well before college even becomes an option. If only marginal students were selected, they might fail for lack of preparation.

Students were selected for interviews from the first 3 EXCEL groups and from the comparison group. They were not selected randomly, but were selected to provide diversity in gender, ethnicity, achievement and year of graduation. While the EXCEL program includes Asian American and low income White students, for the purposes of this study, only African American, Mexican American, and mixed race students were included. The EXCEL students were not paid

for their participation. The non-EXCEL students were paid $20 for their participation. Relevant data concerning the students, including gender, ethnicity, and high school grade point average (GPA), are provided in Table 1.

Interviews

The 38 students were interviewed regarding high school and family experience. EXCEL students were also asked about EXCEL. Interviews took 1 to 1 1/2 hours and were transcribed. The interview was semi-structured; thus every student was supposed to be asked about the same issues, but interviewers were free to follow up on responses as seemed appropriate to the circumstances. All but 6 of the interviews took place in students' homes; 8 of the interviewers were African-American and 1 was White. The interviewers included one professor, one graduate student, and six parents. Parent interviewers were trained by the researchers and paid a modest stipend. Followup sessions were held with parent interviewers to assist them in dealing with the interview process. Because our intent was to describe personal, subjective experience, and because the followup questions varied by interviewer, interview responses were not quantified.

Results

One of the questions asked whether students felt they had had to give up their ethnic identity in order to do well in school. Their responses are summarized in Table 1. Initially it was decided to ask about ethnic identity but not specifically about acting White, but as the interviews proceeded and feedback arrived, it became apparent that this was an important followup question. This explains why some students were explicitly asked whether they had been accused of acting White and others were not. These responses are also summarized in Table 1. In the following quotes, we provide numbers to identify students so that the reader can easily refer to the chart to see the student's characteristics and so the reader can tell when more than one quote comes from the same student. Where names are used, they are pseudonyms. In the quotes, we used the following convention: a dash (—) indicates a pause and an ellipsis (. . .) indicates deleted words.

Acting White

The students we talked with were familiar with the term acting White. This was true of both African American and Mexican American students. They provided the following descriptions of acting White:

Speech:
talk proper
don't talk slang or curse
don't talk ghettoish talk, with half words, making your own words
use big words and enunciate
Say your Spanish surname with an English accent
instead of saying you are going to the movies, say you are going to a flick

Music:
listen to White music, classical music, heavy metal, or rock music

Dress:
don't wear tennis shoes
dress like a preppie
wear a tie
"Why are you buttoning [your shirt]; you're supposed to have your chest hanging out."
wear penny loafers
dress White—[for a girl] roll up your pants, have the back of your shirt hanging out. Tuck the front in and tuck the back out and have big poofy bangs.

School:
"you suck up to the teachers a little bit"
kiss butt
don't work up to your potential at school
get good grades
always do your work
be really neat

Other behaviors:
dating White girls
acting like Carleton (on tv show Fresh Prince of Bellaire)
have lots of White friends, hang around with White people
act stuck up

Of the 17 students who were specifically asked whether they had been accused of acting White, 7 said no. Their response did not seem to depend on their own ethnicity or the racial makeup of their school. For example, a Nikki Dryden, Black female who was among the top 10 in her class at a predominantly Black school, stated that she knew what acting White meant, but that

33: No. I've never had that problem. Because it seems like, in high school, everyone knew me. They knew that I always did my best and it was just like they respected me for it. I mean as far as people getting in trouble or whatever, it was like a lot of times people wouldn't treat me as they would everyone else. I mean they respected me more because of my grades and everything. So it was like I got more respect because of that. . . . I understand what you're saying but I've never had that problem. It's just like everyone there, they knew me, they would encourage me. Or if I would get kind of like a low grade or something on my test, they were like, "Why did you get that? You know you could do better than that." I mean that kind of thing. So I've never had that problem.

On the other hand, Selena Sanders, who was at the same school and was also in the top 10 of her class, was accused:

34: People tell me I talk White. And then I ask the question, "Well, how do White people talk?" And they said "You know, proper like." But I—acting White? They tell me I act preppy or something like that. But that sort of got away from that White, acting White type thing. They go "preppy." They say another word now, "Oh she's prep-like" or something like that.

DB: Does it still have the same racial overtones?

34: Um hum, it does. It's just little things like I wear penny loafers. So wearing penny loafers, I have on my slippers, my hair is always done, I talk really proper, my work is always done, I'm really neat, those type things. So everything together I guess. And then I don't say too much to people. I sort of let them say what they want to say to me and then I'll respond. I'm not the first person to always start a conversation. I like to listen more than I like to talk and—

DB: So people view that as being stuck up or acting White or both?

34: Stuck up *is* acting White.

It seemed as though Nikki, who was not accused, had high achievement yet behaved in ways that she and low achievers were comfortable with; she did nothing to upset the status quo. Selena, on the other hand, was highly social and highly visible—she was in student government and elected to the homecoming court, though not the queen—and liked to assert her individuality through her dress and speech. She crossed borders and was not easily categorized; she seemed to challenge the status quo. One can easily see how she would be a more likely target for accusations.

Spending Time With White Students

A reason that several students who attended racially balanced schools gave for accusations of acting White was that they were perceived as spending too much time with White students.

They were enrolled in college preparation/honors courses that tended to be mostly White. Therefore, most of their friends were White, which meant that most of the people they hung around with were White. For example, a Black female at a public mostly White school said:

31: The majority of my classes are honors classes; therefore there's a lot of White people in my honors classes and there's not too many—I don't have a class that has more than four Black people in it. And if I'm in a class with all the Whites and the Chinese and everything else, all of a sudden Janelle's not Black anymore. Maybe I'm just misinterpreting from what they say to me.

DB: What who says?

31: My Black peers.

DB: Okay. What do they say?

31: They basically ask me "why aren't you true to your color?" And I'm like, "Well, how am I not true?" I'm sorry if I'm smart, you know. I'm not going to sit there and hold myself back just so you can have this feeling that I am being Black. I'm being Black whether I'm smart, dumb, stupid or whatever.

Joe Murphy, a Black male from the same school, stated:

30: Yes. I've been accused by a lot of people, actually, of doing so. A lot of the Black people that I know, or that think they know me, only see an image of me being around a lot of Whites. Whereas most of the times I hung around my classmates and I was usually the only Black male, so I got to really know my classmates and those are my friends. Outside of school, I didn't really have a lot of friends— . . . my teammates, I had a lot of White teammates. So the people I hung around were the people that I saw in school the most. So a lot of people got an image of me as oh, he's a sellout.

These two quotes suggest that affiliation with Whites is a major component of being perceived of as acting White. In their interviews, these two students did not mention accusations due to being in honors classes or high grades, but rather the accusations appeared to be based on whom they hung around with. Joe Murphy's parents also said that they thought he had been accused of acting White and attributed it to the fact that he spent more time with White students than with African Americans. They said this was not because he preferred White students, but because the students most likely to share his aspirations (become a physician) and skills (e.g., star athlete in a "White" sport, German club) tended to be White. They were careful to state that he knew where his ethnic roots were.

Ethnic Identity

Students generally claimed that they had not given up their ethnic identity in order to do well in school, nor had they allowed accusations of acting White to affect their study habits or effort toward achievement. For example, we interviewed three girls from the same Catholic all-girl school. Two said they had not given up ethnic identity:

GT: Do you feel as though you have to give up some of your ethnic identity in order to do well in school?

8: No. That's another reason why I chose to go to the Academy, because I did go to public school for junior high and a lot of the kids were pretty well, "You sound like a White girl, you're stuck up, blah-blah-blah," because I was in Honors classes. A lot of times I was the only Black in the class. Coming to the Academy, everyone wants to succeed. So, it's not really a problem.

The second student:

DB: Do you feel like you have to give up any of your ethnic identity or Blackness in order to do well in school?

6: No. Not at all. It feels good to see other Black students trying to do well at school. And you know it seems like that's when we come together the most in school for school work. And there's not much of us in the school, there's only a handful of Black students in the school.

However, the third student, Karen Cook, assumed that every African American had to give up ethnic identity to do well in the school:

7: No . . . I feel everybody in the Academy is in the category of not totally being themselves, hiding their ethnic identity. Those who aren't able to adjust, just leave. Those who are willing to adjust, maybe adjust somewhat, can stay.

GT: So, what would have happened if you did not acclimate or adjust?

7: I wouldn't have been there.

GT: No? Why not?

7: Because it's almost as though you can't take the atmosphere — the whole atmosphere of the Academy; you just can't take it. It's just something you can't deal with on a day-to-day basis.

Karen commented with some pride that 4 minority students — including 2 of her friends — graduated with honors, yet she also commented regarding African American high achievers, "Their ethnic background is definitely African-American, but their mental set, or their mind state, is not." Karen was one of the few interviewed students who criticized others regarding acting White.

Selena Sanders was more typical; she felt that she had not given up ethnic identity to do well in school, though she was accused. She was in the running for valedictorian, active in organizations in school and outside of school, and won various scholarships to attend a historically Black university. She expressed herself as follows:

DB: You ever feel like you gave up any of your ethnic identity in order to do well in school?

34: What do you mean? I don't understand that question.

DB: Do you have to be less Black....

34: At my high school?

DB: ....in order to do well in school?

34: No, not at my high school. I didn't have that problem. I think the most of, let me think, I didn't really have a problem with identity, racial identity or Black identity or anything like that because everyone around me was the same. I think it might have been different if I would've gone to another high school, maybe.

DB: Sometimes it seems like students who do well at a predominantly Black high school have the hardest time, if they do well in school.

34: I don't see myself having a problem, you mean with education-wise or?

DB: No, with other students.

34: OK, I can see that. Yeah. It's just, it's not animosity, but that's the only word I could think of. Sometimes I feel, uncomfortable and it's not, it's like a group of us, that these 13 people over here do well and everyone knows they do well, so they're sort of in the shadows.

DB: What do you mean in the shadows?

34: They consider you nerds or they think that you think you're better than them type thing. Yeah. But you learn to look over that. But yeah.

DB: Then how would you get elected to Student Body Government if all these people think that you're a fringe member of society?

34: They — see, Student Body Government is more political. Now when we talk about Homecoming Court, I was elected to the Homecoming Court but I would never be elected Queen for that reason, when you get more on a personal level. Like there's a lot of social quirks like that or whatever, the royal type courts for the high school. You would never be the winner but you could be there. Of course they would accept that much, but you could never be the winner.

Selena seemed bothered by accusations of acting White, but not sufficiently to change her behavior. She held very strong, very high achievement goals that drove her to attain high grades,

join clubs, and participate in school politics. She was not about to allow accusations of acting White from low achievers, people she did not want to imitate, to affect her life goals.

Samuel Jackson, an African American male, was also accused of acting White but also denied having given up his ethnic identity:

DB Do you feel as though you had to give up some of your ethnic identity or "Blackness" in order to do well in school?

21 Not at all. I think in order to do well in school I had to more or less identify with myself and of course keep my Afro-centric point of view basically throughout everything. If there was ever a discussion in class, I would voice my African American opinion whatever it would be — I can never, I don't think I was ever really subjected to having to choose between acting Black or acting White, which is something that I sort of hate.

DB Were you ever accused of acting White?

21 Yeah. Plenty of times.

DB Who accused you?

21 Black students. Usually other Black students who in fact weren't doing as well. I was accused of acting White simply because I got good grades. And I would say, "Is it wrong for Black people to do well?" I would go back and say, would say, "Did W.E.B. DuBois act White his whole life?" They'll say, "No, that's different."

DB Now did they know who he was?

21 No. Often I would have to explain to them. They say, "Well that's different," and if I say, "Well, was Martin Luther King acting White?" they'll say, "No, that's different." I wear a tie and I had nice shirts and everything and I found more people saying, "Why are you wearing a tie?" I was like, "'Cause I like wearing a tie." They was like, "Oh, you're trying to act White cause you're wearing a tie." They'll say, "Why are you buttoning? You're supposed to have your chest hanging out." I don't like that. And they would say, "Okay so you're trying to act White." I thought, it got sort of amusing but it was— I don't know, it never bothered me.

Samuel's responses appeared ambiguous because while he denied being bothered, he also said that he did not like the accusations. It seems that most people would at least be made uncomfortable by accusations that they had rejected their roots and their people. Nevertheless, Samuel's voluntary tie-wearing suggests he wanted to stand out as an individual; certainly not many other students, if any, in his public school wore ties. Another Black male, Daniel Smothers, claimed he didn't act White, though he seemed threatened by the question, and appeared ambivalent about accusing two other students (included the just-quoted Samuel Jackson) of acting White:

DB Do you feel like you had to give up part of your ethnic identity or your Blackness in order to do well in school?

19 Hmm. In a way, but in a way not. Not really given up so much, just try to be super smart, but that's something that other students did more than me. For instance, like Samuel — and Samuel's just like Ervin Brooks — they were more — not — they didn't give it up but they were more uppity, try to be super smart. And then me, I came off as yeah I'm smart, but I'm going to be the way I'm going to be.

DB Would you say that they tried to act White?

19 No. They didn't try to act White. They just — no they didn't act White. I'm not saying that they were sellouts or they always tried to act White. They just — No, they weren't a sellout or anything. They didn't try to act White. They were Black on everything. They had Black ways, but it's just they — I don't know. They tried to. I don't know. Sometimes it seemed like they were trying to be so intelligent and they tried to view things more from — I don't know how to describe it. Samuel talk slang but it's like he really wouldn't really talk it. That's what I mean. They're not, not that they're sellouts. They would act Black. They do everything Black, but they wouldn't talk slang because to them it made them look ignorant, and to me, it's like well, I have nothing to prove to anybody because if you know you're smart, prove it to yourself and show everybody, which I have already done, so it's like I already know I'm smart. So what else do I have to show?

It should be noted here that Daniel's teacher agreed that he was "smart," but said that he did not put forth much effort; she considered Samuel by far the better student because he always tried hard. Daniel appeared uneasy about accusing Samuel and Ervin of being sellouts because he recognized that they knew their Black history and spoke out on Black issues, but he felt their avoiding slang and acting uppity were ways to prove their smartness. Daniel then described Joseph Murphy, who came closer to being a sellout. (A possibly important piece of context is that Daniel's Black father married a White woman in a second marriage):

19 There weren't any [sellouts] in EXCEL—Wait a minute. They accuse Joe Murphy—I'd say he's not really a sellout. He knew he was Black and he understood that. But sometimes it did bother me when he tends to overindulge in whiteness. From the standpoint of, not so much listening to White music, just —

DB How did he overindulge?

19 Well, dating White girls before—that was no problem, I have no problem with that—but then he says he'll date a White girl before he'll date a Black girl. Or White girls are easier to date than Black girls.

This accusation that a fellow high achiever or EXCEL student was a sellout was unusual. Only two other students volunteered similar comments. One was Karen Cook, who was already quoted, and the other was Dave, who said that some of his friends had given up their ethnic

identity by " just completely doing everything that White people do. Not to say that they're White things that they do. But they feel that if White men in this country are successful that they, in order to be successful, have to do the things that White men do, and they completely do everything that White people do."

Mexican American students reported experiences similar to those of African Americans regarding acting White; they tended to deny having given up their ethnic identity, but said that they were sometimes accused of it. For example, Maritza, a Mexican American female, stated that she was perceived in her neighborhood as having given up her ethnic identity:

HW: Do you feel as though you have had to give up some of your ethnic identity in order to do well in school?

25: I think other people see that I have. I've noticed as soon as I started high school, and I went to school X [higher income, mostly White], and my other friends went to Y [lower income, multiple ethnicities], or they just quit high school, they kind of said — this is a good one — "Oh, Maritza's changed a lot." Some people just don't recognize me. They may have known me since I was in third grade, and they look at me now, and they just don't recognize me. I don't look different. I look the same. I'm the same person. I just study more. I spend more time doing things that they just don't do anymore. They're too busy working, or they have their babies to take care of or something. Most of the kids around here don't speak Spanish, and my parents taught us Spanish. I know Spanish and English. I just know both of them fluently. I could go from English to Spanish in a second, without thinking about it, and I do it a lot. A lot of the kids, they say I speak English funny. I guess I speak properly or something — I don't know. It's just, to them, it sounds funny because I just don't talk the way they do. It kind of makes me mad sometimes because they really shouldn't say anything because they don't speak their own native language, and they don't know about things like I do. I work hard for something that they don't want. I don't see that I've lost anything. I think of myself as more Mexican than they'll ever be. I think they're the ones that have kind of lost a lot and are out of touch with their ethnic group.

Knowledge of Ethnic Heritage

Several students whom we interviewed seemed offended that people who appeared to know nothing about their own ethnic heritage would accuse people who knew more of acting White. For example, Maritza was offended that Mexican Americans who could not even speak Spanish would dare accuse her of talking funny and acting White when she could speak Spanish and in fact visited Mexico nearly every year. Joe Murphy, who attended a racially balanced school, felt the same way about being accused of selling out:

30: It made me feel bad because I had probably known more Black History and had done more to delve into my history than most of them, and they had the nerve to see me as something

that was trying to negate my heritage. So I mean it made me feel pretty bad but I just learned to try to ignore it. I mean I still can't ignore it when I hear that, it pisses me off, but not everyone is going to like you and they're going to find some way to try to make you angry so I've just tried my best to ignore it.

Competition for Grades

If an aspect of acting White is getting good grades and studying hard to get ahead, then competing for grades would appear to be an indicator of acting White. We were surprised at how many students whom we interviewed were competing for grades. We describe the students' competitive attitudes in a different paper (Bergin & Cooks, 1995). Suffice it say that both males and females competed for grades and academic honors and, in contrast with Fordham's informants, did not report doing things to avoid being perceived publicly as high achievers. For example, a Black male said:

21: There was a group of students who, I'd say, was competing. I made everything into a competition 'cause that's how I keep my drive going. So, I would like subconsciously be competing against everyone. We often competed against each other, not openly and outly, but, more or less. I think that everyone was sort of striving to take a step over each other. That helped in my success.

Mixed Ethnicity

The whole notion of ethnic identity and acting White rests on the assumption that people recognize that they are members of an identifiable ethnic group. Three of the students self-identified as being of mixed race because they had parents of different ethnic groups. Two boys had an African American father and White mother, yet neither mentioned anything about that issue in their interviews. On the other hand, Gina did:

GT: Do you feel as though you have had to give up any of your ethnic identity in order to do well in school?

10:. No. I don't think so. I might just sit there and be real quiet. It's not that I'm afraid to or anything. It's just I don't think anybody would understand where I'm coming from just because I'm two races. I'm not just African American, I'm Filipino American also. And I don't think anybody would understand. So I might just be there and be quiet other than try to speak up. But if it was something that bothers me, I would let them know.

As intermarriage among ethnic groups continues to increase, the issue of ethnic identity and ethnic affiliation as they relate to achievement may become increasingly problematic.

Conclusions

The respondents of this study did not report avoiding academic achievement in order to avoid accusations of acting White. In fact, their mean GPA was 3.3, and many reported competing for grades. The picture they provided contrasts with that of Fordham and Ogbu (1986), who described both underachieving students who avoided achievement and high achieving students who masked their achievement. If we had interviewed only EXCEL students, we might have attributed the lack of fear of acting White to the EXCEL program, which included a field study of the Civil Rights South (Bettis, Cooks, & Bergin, 1994), instruction on multicultural issues, and leaders of color who served as models. However, the statements of non-EXCEL students were similar to those of EXCEL students. The fact that the EXCEL and non-EXCEL students had both applied to the program several years earlier suggests that they shared goals and background characteristics. Cross (1991) stated that stage theories of ethnic identity explain "how *assimilated* Black adults, as well as *deracinated, deculturalized,* or *miseducated* Black adults are transformed by a series of circumstances and events into persons who are more Black or Afrocentrically aligned" (p. 190, emphasis in original). He also pointed out that these stages are a resocializing experience, and that "Of course, it is possible for a Black person to be socialized from early childhood through adolescence to have a Black identity" (p. 190). It seems possible that the students whom we interviewed had experienced such a socialization, while those who were accusing others of acting white felt insecure about their ethnic identity or were in an immersion phase of ethnic identity development in which they felt compelled to prove their Blackness and reject Whiteness. Our data do not directly address this issue; future research might benefit from studying accusations of acting White in conjunction with stages of ethnic identity development.

Most of the students we interviewed reported no loss of ethnic identity. They made very few comments that could be interpreted as reflecting adoption of or fear of a raceless persona (Fordham, 1988). The students felt strong resentment toward accusations of acting White, and unlike Fordham's informants (Fordham, 1988; Fordham & Ogbu, 1986), did not seem to be intimidated by the accusations. For example, a Black female (student 34) was asked whether she

was influenced to change her behavior. She said, "No. That's why I was an outcast." To an observer, she would probably not appear to be an outcast because she was active in student government and was elected by the student body to the Homecoming Court, yet she *felt* like an outcast. Our informants made comments like feeling pissed off and not wanting to hold themselves back in order to fit in. Some seemed to identify more with leaders like DuBois and Martin Luther King than with low achieving students.

The students we interviewed frequently named academic achievement as a marker for acting White; however, mere academic achievement did not appear to be sufficient to attract attention as a sellout or person acting White. Most of the students we interviewed could be considered adequate or high achievers (see GPAs in Table 1), yet in the interviews they did not dwell on their grades, Advanced Placement classes, or honors status as drawing accusations of acting White. The issues pertaining to acting White that they dwelled on in the interviews included dialect, hanging around with White students, acting stuck up, and style of dress. They seemed to draw the ire of fellow minority students when they went beyond high grades and also dressed out of the norm for their group, or spoke proper English, especially outside of the classroom, or hung around with White students.

It seemed that the students who had the hardest time with regard to accusations of acting White or selling out were those in racially balanced schools. Student 8, a Black female in a Catholic girls school, had experienced accusations of acting White in her racially balanced junior high, but not in the private nearly all White high school. Students in racially balanced schools seemed to feel more polarization based on race, so they were under more pressure to choose sides, to choose whether to affiliate with White students in addition to students of their own ethnic group.

We did not hear a single comment from students admitting that they altered their behavior, reduced their effort, or earned poor grades in order to avoid accusations of acting White. However, in no way are we claiming that students do not alter they behavior, reduce their effort, or earn poor grades in order to avoid accusations of acting White. We are claiming that a significant proportion of African American and Mexican American students who were earning good grades in

eighth grade were still doing so in high school and did not report being affected by accusations of acting White. We suspect that students like those Fordham describes and students like those we describe exist side by side in schools throughout the United States. Further investigation could study what factors affect whether students choose to avoid being accused of acting White.

References

Bettis, P. J., Cooks, H. C., & Bergin, D. A. (1994). "It's not steps anymore, but more like shuffling": Student perceptions of the Civil Rights Movement and ethnic identity. *Journal of Negro Education, 63*, 197-211.

Cross, W. E. (1991). *Shades of black: Diversity in African-American identity.* Philadelphia: Temple University Press.

Fordham, S. (1988). Racelessness as a factor in Black students' school success: Pragmatic strategy or Pyrrhic victory? *Harvard Educational Review, 58*, 54-84.

Fordham, S., & Ogbu, J. U. (1986). Black students' school success: Coping with the "Burden of 'acting white.'" *The Urban Review, 18*, 176-206.

Ogbu, J. U. (1987). Variability in minority school performance: A problem in search of an explanation. *Anthropology & Education Quarterly, 18*, 312-334.

Phinney, J. S. (1990). Ethnic identity in adolescents and adults: Review of research. *Psychological Bulletin, 108*, 499-514.

	Ethnicity	Sex	Gave up ethnic identity?	Accused of Acting White?	High School	Year in school	EXCEL?	High School GPA
1.	Filipino	M	No	No	C. boys mostly White	First year college		2.660
2.	Mixed	M	No	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Junior		3.470
3.	Mex Am	M	No	No	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		3.583
4.	Afr Am	M	No	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		4.420
5.	Afr Am	M	No	---	C. boys mostly White	HS Senior		3.10
6.	Afr Am	F	No	---	C. girls mostly White	HS Senior		2.200
7.	Afr Am	F	Yes	---	C. girls mostly White	HS Senior	No	2.184
8.	Afr Am	F	No	Yes	C. girls mostly White	HS Jr & Sr (2 interviews)		4.184
9.	Afr Am	F	No	---	C. integrated coed	HS Senior		2.615
10.	Mixed	F	No	---	Public mostly White to C. integrated coed	HS Junior		3.800
11.	Mixed	M	No	Yes	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	No	3.777
12.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	No	2.243
13.	Afr Am	M	No	---	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.489
14.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	No	2.720
15.	Afr Am	M	No	No	Public racially balanced	HS Senior		2.878
16.	Afr Am	M	No	---	Public racially balanced	HS Junior		2.886
17.	Afr Am	F	Yes	Yes	Public racially balanced	First year college		2.852
18.	Afr Am	M	Sort of	Yes	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.004
19.	Afr Am	M	Sort of	No	Public racially balanced	First year college		3.067
20.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	No	3.478
21.	Afr Am	M	No	Yes	Public racially balanced	First year college		4.018
22.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public racially balanced	HS Junior		4.100
23.	Mex Am	F	No	No	Public racially balanced	HS Senior	No	2.482
24	Mex Am	F	No	---	Public mostly White	HS Junior		2.710
25.	Mex Am	F	No	Yes	Public mostly White	HS Senior		2.732
26.	Mixed	M	No	---	Public mostly White	HS Senior		4.075
27.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.783
28.	Afr Am	F	Yes	---	Public mostly White	HS Senior		2.265
29.	Afr Am	F	---	No	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.421
30.	Afr Am	M	No	Yes	Public mostly White	First year college		3.998
31.	Afr Am	F	a little	Yes	Public mostly White	HS Senior		3.560
32.	Afr Am	M	No	---	Public nearly all Black	HS Junior		4.169
33.	Afr Am	F	No	No	Public nearly all Black	First year college		3.735
34.	Afr Am	F	No	Yes	Public nearly all Black	First year college	No	4.000
35.	Afr Am	M	No	---	Public nearly all Black	HS Senior	No	2.695
36.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public nearly all Black	First year college		3.114
37.	Afr Am	F	No	a little	Public nearly all Black	HS Senior	No	3.837
38.	Afr Am	F	No	---	Public nearly all Black	HS Senior	No	3.911

Note. Afr Am = African American. Mex Am = Mexican American. HS = high school. GPA = grade point average. M = male. F = Female. --- = not asked that question directly. C. = Catholic. Students were in EXCEL unless "No" indicated in EXCEL? column. "Public mostly White schools" had a significant number of students of color.